Look Out, Lindbergh—Here I Come

I choose flying as a career and bump into some funny things

by

EDDIE SCHNEIDER

As told to MARY BELL DANN

I RECENTLY flew more than twelve thousand miles in a little over a month, through rain, fog, wind and snow, over mountains, cities and deserts, in a three-year-old, second-hand airplane that had already traveled some five hundred thousand miles. During that time I never was very late for an appointment or put a single scratch on myself. And considering that I am hardly an expert pilot at nineteen years of age, I knew that these statements must prove something about modern commercial aviation. But what?

Being pretty close to the picture, it is hard for me to see, but it does seem that it would show that aviation is for young people as well as the older and wiser generation. In fact, in New Jersey, a boy can get his pilot's license two years before he can get his driver's license.

So this is aimed at the youngsters, hoping they won't take it too seriously, and those who have arrived at years of discretion, first as pure amusement because some darned funny and interesting things can happen in aviation and second, there is a concealed missionary purpose, to show that aviation has arrived as an industry.

Not that it has much bearing on the story, but because people are always asking me, my name is really Eddie: I was christened that way. It isn't very dressy, but it serves the purpose. As for background, my grandfather was some kind of Scandinavian royalty and was thrown out of it for marrying a peasant girl. Dad has a butcher shop in Jersey City.

A recent photograph of Eddie Schneider with his Cessna. Eddie's winning smile has won him many friends among flyers.

The first time I was in the air was in Germany, from Hamburg to Hanover. My sister Alice was kind of nervous and decided she didn't want to make the flight after all and started to open the door to get out, not knowing that we had taken off and were in level flight. She changed her mind, you bet, and because there was so little motion she got to like it. Dad said, when he stepped out at the airdrome, that he wished he could always travel that way. We had had to coax him hard to get him to fly in the first place.

Right then I did some planning. I wanted to learn to fly a ship more than anything I had ever wanted to do in my life, but several months went by, and in the meantime I went back to work in the bank, before I was able to do anything definite about taking up what I hoped would be my life work.

The idea stuck and one Sunday night I went out to Roosevelt Field to find out all I could about it. We have Sunday dinner late in our house and it is a good two and a half hour trip by tube and train, although you can make it in a few minutes by air. It was dark when I got there and they were just about to close up for the night when I arrived.

I guess they thought I was having a brainstorm by the way I came madly dashing up and asked rapid questions. They didn't take me quite seriously as a prospective student and just merely tolerated me. I fooled them. Two days later I was back again and ready to fly.

Bill Ulbrich took me up over the cemetery in Westbury and pointed down, saying, "See that place? Well, you will be there if you touch the controls," and had a piece of iron pipe in his hand to enforce what he said. I don't blame him for not wanting me to monkey with the controls before I knew what it was all about, but the remark seems funny in this day of teaching you to fly by applied psychology.

Then he gave me the works, loops, barrel-rolls, in fact at that time I had no idea what I was getting. At the end of twenty minutes of stunting he told me to take the controls and keep the nose of the ship going straight and on the horizon in level flight. I did my best, but it was hard because I was dizzy from all the unaccustomed motions. I liked and didn't like it, but was back the next day for more. I didn't want to drag out my period of instruction, but to go through in a hurry.

Aviation was beginning to skyrocket. Everyone was interested and there was lots of activity on the field, but not much system, and there was still a good deal of war surplus junk around. One piece they hadn't gotten rid of yet was an old Tommy Morse scout plane.

One day a pilot who hadn't flown in about a year took it up and after circling the field a few times made a perfect landing—about fifty feet up. After that he came down quickly and as the ship hit the ground the old rotary Le-Rhone motor kept right on spinning across the field. The wings folded up like those of a tired pigeon and the fuselage broke in three places and bent up like an old broken-down donkey. The wheels went up over the head of the pilot, who looked alarmed, but wasn't hurt.

I learned something every day. Soon after I had started there a mechanic named Porter was cranking an OX Travel Air and forgot to look at the throttle to make sure it was closed. It was unfortunately half open and the minute the engine caught hold the ship started chasing him. I grabbed a wing tip, but that made it go in circles. The mechanic was too rattled to think about heading straight out, and kept just a few steps ahead of the whirling prop.

Of course, it could have been a serious affair, but I can remember how funny he looked with a greasy rag, that was half out of his pocket, streaming right out straight behind him and the prop almost catching it. He was swearing so hard and fast that that cut down his speed too. We would probably still be running around in circles if dear old Bill Ulbrich hadn't jumped in to cut the switch.

My solo was just another solo. Bill

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climbed out and neither of us noticed that a landing gear strut was broken. Nothing gave way, though. I must have made my first good landings that day.

SOON after I had made my solo flight another fellow, I don't know his name, as he was never called anything but the Great Dane on the field, was about to go up for his solo flight. The inspector told him to make a spot landing, that is, to come to a dead stop at a given point. Where? Oh, right where the inspector was standing then. He was very nervous about making an accurate landing and thought of nothing else. The inspector forgot all about it and stayed right where he was.

The first thing he knew the student had circled the field and was about to sit down on top of him. The student couldn't see the inspector on account of the engine out front being in his way and the inspector was too petrified to move for a minute. Then he hopped out of the way and immediately there was a wing where he had been. He was refused his license and couldn't apply for another for ninety days, which didn't seem quite fair.

They were trying to teach us safety and I don't doubt that we were a wild lot and needed it. One day a fellow overshot the old Roosevelt Field and, passing over the gully between the two, came in at Curtiss Field, a mile away. Another boy came in so fast downwind that he had to hook a wing around a telegraph pole and spin around to slow down. Strange enough, he didn't hurt either himself or the ship, but they grounded him for two weeks as a lesson in caution in watching the wind direction.

They had initiated me when I arrived at the field, so when the next new student, a big Irishman named Meighan, came I was ready to give him his. He was about to step in the ship for his first flight when I went around front and began inspecting the prop very critically. He was, of course, interested in what seemed to be troubling me. I said I didn't think he ought to fly in the crate until someone got some more prop wash.

He was off in a minute to see if he could find some. Prop wash is the slang for the blast of air sent back by the whirling propeller. He went in the nearest hangar and asked for it. The guy in there knew it was a joke and told him he couldn't have any without getting a requisition for it, so off he went down to the office. They must have smiled when they wrote it out, but he never caught on.

Back he went to the hangar and the same fellow gave him a bucket to get it in and made believe look for it and then he said he guessed there wasn't any left and that Meighan had better go down to Curtiss Field for it. So he hopped in his car and tried all the shops and hangars there. In the last one a mechanic told him to stand by the tail of a ship that was on the line while he started the motor and catch all the prop wash he could in his pail. When it all was explained to him and he had to come back with a bucket of air he surely wanted my scalp.

One student soloed, was passed by the Department of Commerce, and bought an old OX Travel Air. An OX is a wartime motor and hardly very reliable. He flew the ship until one day the motor conked on him and he was lucky enough to get down on a farm okay. He couldn't get out again even when he fixed his motor on account of trees on three sides of the field and a brick wall on the fourth. We all told him the best thing to do was to take the wings off and tow her over to a bigger field and take off there. He said no, she was rigged just right and he didn't want to mess with her.

So he got an estimate on how much it would cost to rebuild the wall if he took it down. It was about three hundred dollars. He decided to take the bricks down himself and spent ten days doing it. He made an aperture several feet wider than his wing span. When he finally got in his ship to take off through the opening he had made he was so nervous that he ground looped the ship and headed straight for the part where the bricks were still standing. The farmer made him pay for the wall, you bet, and the ship was a total write-off.

Next month Eddie tells us of his coast-to-coast trip which broke the Junior Transcontinental Record. Don't fail to read this interesting account.

However, it was not only student pilots who made odd landings. Roger Williams at that time had been flying four or five years, but hadn't got the Transatlantic bug yet. This particular Sunday when there was a large crowd at the field he thought he would make such a short landing that he would astound everybody at his ability to set a ship down on a small space.

He did just that thing, only on the hangar roof. He would have passed over it neatly if a sudden up current hadn't shot his tail up, and the same thing happened as if you lifted up on one end of a seesaw, the nose went down. Jenny left both of her wings on the roof and Roger, awfully sore, went off muttering about his helluva fine landing.

There was another peculiar crackup when Emil Burgin was through using the Exclamation Point for refueling the Tree Musketeers and the Fokker was sold to someone who couldn't fly worth a darn. He started to land into the wind all right, but thinking he was going too fast, he began banking. When the wheels hit the ground he was crosswind and by the time he had lost most of his speed he was going downwind.

Then he hit a series of bumps and the last one bounced him right over on his back. Newspaper photographers flocked all around shooting pictures and mechanics threw a rope over the tail to hoist the ship back right side up again, and all this time no one had even thought about the pilot. I looked in and he was sitting in the cabin looking sort of puzzled-like.

Even Bill, my instructor, had had his forced landing down in Georgia. The only clear space was directly in front of a house, so he sat down there and didn't stop rolling until he was right up to the front porch. An old colored woman ran out the back door shouting, "Lawd, deliver me." He stayed in that town three weeks, but he never did see her again.

With the kind of equipment they flew you wonder how there were relatively so few washouts.

Most of the accidents were just comical, nobody ever seemed to be hurt. A hard landing in those days would scatter a ship with wooden longerons all over the field, whereas the same landing in a modern ship with good shock gear and steel tubing framework will just do a good healthy bounce.

IN the meantime I had learned to fly —somewhat. I could get around all right without doing any great damage to the ship or myself, but I had not enough hours to be doing passenger hauling and hadn't the money to buy additional time. So I tooked up with the American Air Express as a grease monkey to help in washing down ships and doing general engine work. I found out a good many things about motors I was glad to know later on.

Bud Clarke must have been crazy when he organized the outfit. His men weren't fliers and naturally weren't much of a success at running it. They must have sunk about fifty thousand dollars in the proposition with buying a Loening and the Stearman that Bud cracked up four times, and all the necessary equipment. They barnstormed at Rye for a while and then petered out.

Buddy got three baths in one day at New London the day of the Harvard-Yale regatta and nobody could hate salt water worse than he does. He was celebrating because Yale won and he went to Yale. He had been anchored in the river and in taking off forgot the anchor rope. He was just over a motor boat when his rope tightened and he dove in. The floats hit the roof of the launch and sheared it off. A fellow inside who had bent over to fix the engine stood up and found he had nothing but sky over him.

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The men on a Coast Guard cutter helped him hoist his plane onto the davit of their boat. Buddy had forgotten something he needed and leaned over the side of the cutter to reach into the cockpit to get it when a swell coming down the river rocked the boat and Buddy went on over. He managed to dry off somewhat and promoted himself a ride into New London in a speedboat.

On the way the engine went dead and he volunteered to crawl out forward to see where the trouble was. As he reached the bow a "big ocean liner" as he called it, probably an excursion boat, passed and the bow of the speedboat buried itself in the wake and rose again. Buddy came up separately. The first thing the Swede who was running the boat asked was, "Did you fix the engine?"

I had wanted a ship that I could fly around in whenever I wanted, but not having too much money, I couldn't think very seriously about it. When I did get one it was quite accidental how it came about. I was over in John Hay Whitney's hangar, talking to his mechanic, Carl Schneider, not a relative of mine, but a good friend, when Whitney's secretary, Edgar Woodhams, came in.

We got to talking and he told me that he had flown during the war. He went on to say that he was doing a lot of traveling on business. The idea popped into my head that he might better be flying and I told him so: that he would spend less time than going by train and that new ships were much safer than those in which he had flown during the war. He said there was some sense to what I had told him and that he would think over the possibilities of using air transportation in his business.

A week later he was back saying he had decided to get a ship of his own. I knew of a Spartan for sale over in Westfield, so I went over and picked it up and made him a demonstration. I don't know anything about salesmanship, but I gave him the ride of his life. He bought it and took me on as pilot.

We went places and I worked in some cross-country and night-flying experience, but mostly I was giving him instruction, as he hadn't done any flying in over ten years and he had lost all sense of it. I was seventeen and he was a mere child of forty-six. I'll say I learned more about flying by teaching him than I did by doing it myself.

Carl Schneider had also had some work during the war, but he was as rusty as Woodhams. I soloed both of them, although I had less than sixty hours myself. No other instructors other than those of Roosevelt School are allowed to use Roosevelt Field, so we did our flying over at the Aviation Country Club field in Hicksville, as Whitney is a member there.

I'LL never forget one thing I saw at Hicksville. You will probably remember reading in the papers that certain members of the New York police force were detailed to aviation work. One of the cops was over at Hicksville to practice deadstick landings away from the traffic at Roosevelt. He made a nice three-point landing with his motor off. The ship didn't roll far on the ground and he got out to crank it in order to taxi over to where he could take off again. But he forgot that he cut his motor by the switch and that the gas was still full on.

When the engine caught the plane plunged at him. He ducked under the wing and tail as they went over him and then realized that the ship was liable to wind itself up in something, so off he went after it. It was quite a sight. Most of the cops were about equally successful as aviators. I've heard it explained that their feet were too big for the rudder pedals.

Another day we had quite some excitement when Woodhams came out to the hangar with about two hundred thousand dollars worth of diamonds in his pocket and proceeded to lose them. He was taking them to John Hay from a jeweler so that he could select one for the ring for his fiancee. I don't know why the jeweler let him cart them away in the old tobacco sack like Bull Durham comes in, but let me tell you that there was a mad scramble until they were found. Woodhams wasn't very much perturbed, he said they weren't good enough stones anyway and in the end they didn't use any of them.

The Spartan was built well enough, but she had a foreign motor, the Walters, which is built in Czechoslovakia, that did not have the power necessary for the ship. She would just sort of stagger up into the air and you were never quite sure she would make it although in the air she was sweet-running.

Then, too, the landing gear wasn't strong enough and would fold up. I'm not denying that Carl and I didn't use her hard. They give it out that the

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"Stand By to Bomb Mouzon"

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right all the way up the valley. When Montfaucon and Romagne were behind them, Fiske made a signal to the other planes in his flight. They closed in at once and made a tight "V", for this would enable them to resist enemy planes much better. The 20th Squadron had but eight machines now; motor trouble had forced one of them to turn back.

The clouds became thicker and more annoying as they proceeded on their way. Since it was Fiske's job as leading observer to determine where the bombs should be dropped in case the real objective happened to be obscured, he peered anxiously over at the fast-flying panorama of clouds beneath.

The November wind—bitter at 14,000 feet—made the tears run from his eyes and then froze them on his cheeks. But he was hardly conscious of frozen tears; what bothered him was the difficulty of seeing the ground and their objective. He knew he must do something quickly. They were moving ahead at tremendous speed, the anti-aircraft shells were bursting near, conclusive evidence that the Germans had seen the formation. In a few moments the Fokkers would be upon them.

He couldn't see Mouzon. What should he do? Bomb Stenay? He could see a section of the city through the ragged edge of a cloud. Fiske wavered but changed his mind as the formation from the 166th Squadron continued to plow ahead. Perhaps, after all, they could see Mouzon from where they were. Opposite Mouzon, however, they wheeled about and sought another target. But when Fiske got to that spot, the clouds divided and revealed the town.

It was a splendid break for the 20th, and Fiske directed his pilot over the town. At the moment he saw Mouzon looming up in his sight, he warned the observers behind to get ready. The event they had come all this distance for was at hand. Peering intently at the sight, Fiske watched the town below ride along it until it appeared opposite the cross-bar. A tug on the lever and the bombs sailed downwards.

The formation circled now and started the homeward flight. All the airmen peered intently at the ground and watched the fires spring up where their bombs had exploded. They were gratified to see several before the clouds cut off the view.

The machines were comparatively light now and capable of making fair speed under ordinary conditions; yet they progressed but slowly, being held back by the terrific head wind.

THEY had not got far when Fiske was startled by a Fokker that bobbed up through the clouds near them. Hastily grabbing a Verys pistol, he fired a shell that threw out seven red balls of fire, the signal that enemy aircraft had been sighted. Making sure that his

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Spartan won't spin. They mean she won't fall into an involuntary spin, but Carl and I wanted to see just what was what. We were up around a thousand feet, playing around and he put her in a vertical bank and then gave her bottom rudder and top aileron. We made three turns with the power on. Carl let go of the controls and she brought herself out easily, but we were right above the tree tops around the polo field.

We washed out a wing panel and smashed a prop that we had borrowed from the Siemens-Halske man, and didn't know until we had ruined it that he had borrowed it from someone else, who had it loaned to him by someone who had borrowed it from Thea Rasche, who in the meantime had gone back to Germany. It was terribly complicated and I don't know if it ever was straightened out. We painted the ship red and sold it. I found myself minus a job.

I didn't have time enough for my transport ticket and real airline work, so took what I could get, even if it was test-flying. The insurance people say it is dangerous. I am inclined to agree with them. Anyway the unforeseen can be relied on to happen.

It came about this way: a man in the wicker furniture business came to the conclusion that a Jennie's wings were no marvels of efficiency. We all knew that. The only difference was that he did something about it. He persuaded the Sikorsky factory, which makes a good wing, to build one for Jenny that would take the place of both her old ones.

By changing her from a biplane to a monoplane he hoped to change all the performance characteristics. He was right. She climbed like no one had ever seen a Jenny climb before. She was *fast*. She was controllable with one finger now where you had to fight her with two hands before. I liked her fine until I tried a whipstall. There was a crack and a bang and she shuddered all over. So did I. I worked all the controls and found them to be still operative.

I worked up nerve to try the same maneuver again. The same splintering, crashing noise came again. That was plenty for me and I came down without delay. The moment the wheels hit the ground something struck me in the back of the head. It was the door to the tool compartment, which no one had told me was loose. Why it didn't strike my head when it flew open in the air I don't know. The old crate is still over at the field though and people come over on Sunday and try to figure out what brand of airplane it is. If I am going to do any more test-flying I would just as soon do it on new planes.

I always felt sorry for Charlie Levine. He had a hangar on the field, too, but no one took him seriously. There are unpleasant things that can be said about him, as there can be about most anybody. But it took a heck of a lot of nerve for him to go across and you have got to admit that. And he did a good deal for aviation if spending money on it counts.

He had heard a lot about the ability of a group of French engineers and let them set out to design the Uncle Sam. He incidentally let himself in for a gypping. It cost him a half million dollars before he was through with them.

There are, as most people know, different wing curves. Some are best for speed, other for climb and others for general efficiency. So it is not unusual for a fine plane to embody several curves. But the Uncle Sam employed eighteen in each wing and quite a few in the fuselage, making it difficult and very costly of construction.

Most airplane builders use standard parts in many places on their machines, but everything that went into the Uncle Sam was made for that job alone. When it was finished it was a huge, heavy plane, supposed to be suitable for carrying a great load for a long distance. But there wasn't a pilot who cared to fly it.

Charlie Levine wanted Bill Stultz to fly it, but Bill didn't act interested at all as he was only offered a hundred dollars to do it. Bill could act very independent and did. He wouldn't leave the ground in it for less than a thousand. Charlie pleaded and argued but he didn't get any place. The next day he came back and said a thousand was all right. Bill wouldn't do it until he had a check. Levine gave him a check. No, it had to be certified before he would accept it. By that time it was too late to take it to the bank to have it certified and they had to wait until the next day.

Bill finally deposited the money in his account and then took it up. He was in the air just six minutes and you could see didn't like the way she handled by the way he didn't do much with her. He came down and Levine was wild. He didn't consider that the ship had been properly tested. But Bill had seen all he wanted of it and was frank about saying so.

Levine asked him if there were any changes he would advise making and Bill said, "Yes, put some more gas in the tanks and touch a match to it." I guess the way of progress is full of heartbreaks like that.

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